

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
GEORGE DEWEY
ADMIRAL OF THE NAVY



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P R E F A C E

IT was my fortune to be in command on May 1, 1898, of an American squadron in the first important naval action against a foreign foe since the War of 1812. The morning that we steamed into Manila Bay marked an epoch in the history of our navy and in that of our country in its relations with other great nations. A battle in a harbor whose name was unknown to our average citizen made us a world-power, with a resultant impetus to the national imagination and a new entail of national responsibilities. My orders were to capture or destroy the enemy's force, and to conduct offensive operations in the Philippine Islands. These orders I endeavored to obey with all possible expedition, in keeping with the traditions of our navy.

After the battle I received so many requests from publishers and editors for contributions in any form under my name that I might well have concluded that the victory which had come as the climax of my naval career was about to embark me on a literary career, toward which I naturally had the disinclination of a man of action. Urgings from many quarters to write my reminiscences have continued

to the present time. My answer invariably has been that my record up to the time of the battle had not in itself sufficient personal significance to warrant an autobiography; for the life of every naval officer doing his duty as it comes to him, under the authority of the President and of Congress, merges into the life of the whole navy as a unit of service in preparedness for national defence in a crisis.

In keeping with the decision made when I was at Manila, my official reports have been thus far my only public account of the battle. However, after my return to Washington, for the sake of historical accuracy I wrote, with the assistance of my aide, the late Commander Nathan Sargent, U. S. N., a complete account of my command of the Asiatic Squadron from the time I hoisted my commodore's pennant until my return home in 1899. My plan was not to have this published until after my death. But now, fifteen years after the battle, I am yielding to the arguments of my friends, not only to have it published, but also to write my recollections of my career before Manila Bay brought me into prominent public notice.

It is fifty-nine years since I became an acting midshipman. Thanks to the creation of the grade of admiral of the navy by Congress in 1899, I was not retired at the usual retiring age, but kept on the active list for life. My memory stretches from an apprenticeship under the veterans of the War of

1812, those heroes of the old sailing-frigates and ships of the line; from the earlier days of the steam-frigates through the Civil War; from the period of inertia in the 'seventies, when our obsolete ships were the byword of the navies of the world, to the building of the ships of our new navy, which I was to give its first baptism of fire; and, finally, to my service as head of the general board of the navy since the Spanish War.

I have been through many administrations and many political changes, and have known many famous men both at home and abroad. When I entered the Naval Academy, in 1854, Commodore Perry was just opening Japan to civilization; it was only six years since California had become United States territory; while there was as yet no transcontinental railroad. At seventy-five I am writing in the hope of giving some pleasure to my countrymen, from whom I have received such exceptional honors, and in the hope that my narrative may be of some value and inspiration to the young men of the navy of to-day, who are serving with the same purpose that animated the men of Decatur's, Macdonough's, and Farragut's day, and later, the men of our squadrons which fought at Manila and Santiago.

I may add that in everything that refers to my command of the Asiatic Squadron in 1898-9 the greatest pains have been taken to insure the correctness of every detail; but in the reminiscences of a

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more remote period I must often depend upon my recollection of incidents which were not recorded at the time that they came under my observation. I narrate them as I remember them. In this part particularly, as well as for his literary advice and assistance in the whole work, it is a pleasure to acknowledge my indebtedness to Mr. Frederick Palmer, a friend of Manila days.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "George Dewey". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the main text of the preface.

May 12, 1913.

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
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CHAPTER I

EARLY YEARS

DURING my long stay in the heat of Manila Bay after the battle, certain angles of view of the irregular landscape of Luzon from the deck of the flagship *Olympia* often recalled the Green Mountains of my boyhood days. Indeed, I never look across a stretch of rolling country without a feeling of homesickness for Vermont. My ancestors were reared among the New England hills. They were of the old Pilgrim stock whose character has so eminently impressed itself on that of the nation.

A desire for religious freedom brought the French Huguenot family of Douai to Kent, in England, in the latter half of the sixteenth century. There the name became Duee. In a later time a desire for religious freedom sent one Thomas Duee, the founder of the American family, from Sandwich, in Kent, to Massachusetts, where the name was changed to Dewey. He settled at Dorchester in 1634, and mention of him appears in the old town records as follows:

It is granted that Thomas Duee shall have 2 acres of mowing ground, neere the Fresh Marsh, which he hath formerly mowen, in satisfaction for an acre of ground, which he left in common at his house.

Later he became one of the founders of Windsor, Connecticut. He had five children. My branch is that of Josiah, the second son, who had the rank of sergeant in King Philip's War.

My great-grandfather, William Dewey, was one of the volunteers at the battle of Lexington, and his brother, Simeon Dewey, was with Ethan Allen at the taking of Fort Ticonderoga by the Green Mountain Boys. My grandfather, Simeon Dewey, born in 1770, formed a connecting link for me with the Revolution, of which he had many youthful memories. He was particularly fond of telling how; as a boy of nine, he had taken a team of oxen to the woods, felled a tree, drawn the log to the house, and cut it up into firewood without any assistance. He was a farmer in the days when much of the soil of Vermont was still virgin, before competition from the opening up of the prairie land of the West had led to the abandonment of so many New England farms. I recollect him as the embodiment of the old Puritan qualities, with his lip and cheeks shaven and a beard about his chin and throat, in the fashion of his time. On my first cruise in the Mediterranean I sent him an olive-wood walking-stick from the Holy Land, which he used until the day of his death, in 1863, when I was a lieutenant in Farragut's command in the Gulf.

My father, Doctor Julius Yemans Dewey, after his graduation from the medical department of the



DOCTOR JULIUS YEMENS DEWEY

University of Vermont, settled for practice in Montpelier, where, in a comfortable frame house of the type which you may see in any New England town, I was born, December 26, 1837, the youngest of three brothers. My mother I hardly remember, as she died when I was only five. To my father's influence in my early training I owe, primarily, all that I have accomplished in the world. From him I inherited a vigorous constitution and an active temperament. He was a good deal more than a successful practising physician. He was one of those natural leaders to whom men turn for unbiassed advice. His ideas of right and wrong were very fixed, in keeping with his deep religious scruples.

My early life was that of the boys of the neighborhood of a quiet street in an American town, which, to my mind, is about as healthy a life as a growing boy can lead. I went early to the district school, and they say the nature of my disposition led me into a great many adventures. Certainly I was full of animal spirits, and I liked things to happen wherever I was. Probably I had a gift for stirring up the other boys to help me in my enterprises. A life of Hannibal which I had received as a present fired my imagination. In winter it was easy to make-believe that in storming a neighboring hill I was making the passage of the Alps. If there were no other soldiers to follow me, I might draft my sister Mary, who was two years my junior.

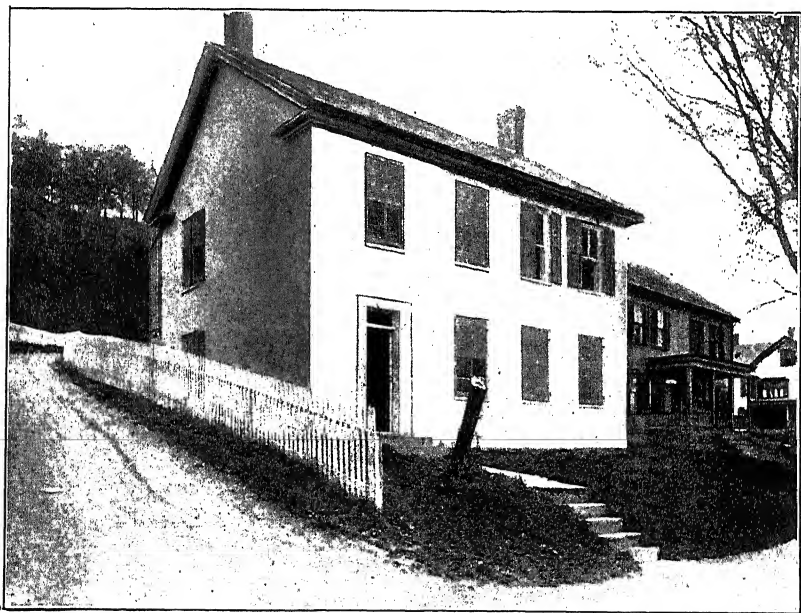
My memory has kept no account of the number of boyish battles that I was in. The first day that the legislature sat was always a great occasion in the State capital, and boys used to come in from near-by towns for the gingerbread and sweet cider festivals, counterparts of the pea-nut and lemonade festivals of to-day, while their elders were shopping, trading horses, and talking politics. For the phalanx of our street it was an occasion for proving whether or not the outsiders were more valiant than we.

One of my favorite deeds of bravado was descending the old State-house steps blindfolded, with the on-lookers wondering whether I would slip on the way and take the rest of the flight head first. I was a good swimmer and had plenty of opportunity for practice in the waters of the Onion River, since called the Winooski, which was near our house. Perhaps some boy may have since excelled me in the length of time that he could hold his head under water, but my record was unbeaten in my day. It gave me the authority of leadership in all water functions.

On one occasion, when the river was swollen to a flood, I thought that it would be a grand exploit to drive a horse and wagon across the current. The wagon was submerged. I crawled over the dashboard onto the horse's back, and he brought me drenched to the shore. I was less worried over what I had escaped than over the reckoning that



THE BIRTHPLACE OF ADMIRAL DEWEY AT MONTPELIER,
VERMONT



THE SCHOOL-HOUSE AT MONTPELIER

was to come with a father whose discipline was so necessary to a nature that was inclined to rebel against sedate surroundings. When he returned from a professional call he found me in bed in my room, shivering very determinedly.

"You ought to be glad that I am alive!" I told him reproachfully. He seemed to take the same view, for I was not punished, though he had lost his wagon.

As I grew older the masters of our district school had such a difficult time in keeping order that they were frequently changed. Some of the boys of my age regarded it as their business to test each new appointee. Such rebellious manifestations were not uncommon in district schools of that time and certainly did not contribute to scholarship. My father doubtless saw that I was in need of discipline, and he sent me, at the age of fourteen, to the old Military Academy at Norwich, Vermont. It had been founded by the first superintendent of West Point, Captain Alden Partridge. At one time its reputation had been so high that it was considered superior to West Point, and many boys from the South, where the military spirit was more common in those days than in the North, had been among its pupils. We lived in dormitories and had regular military drill. As an institution in keeping with its original purpose, Norwich had greatly deteriorated. I am glad to say it has now recovered its former excellence.

Not long ago in Woodstock, Vermont, where I spent my summers, the judge of the district court there invited me to sit on the bench with him and see how the cases were conducted. I answered him that I already had a pretty good idea of court proceedings in Woodstock from personal experience, and the docket of the old court-house in Woodstock records the following in expression of the view which might be taken of a school-boy's pranks in a school academy town in the early fifties:

WINDSOR COUNTY COURT
Dec. Term, 1854.

THE STATE
vs.

CONVERSE & BASSETT
For Comstock

LLOYD E. BOWERS,
GORDON S. HUBBARD,
DANIEL COMSTALK,
GEORGE DEWEY *and*
MARTIN V. B. WASSON.

As will be seen, Comstalk was the only one of us who had a lawyer. The five culprits had been outside the window of a room where hymns were being sung and broken up the meeting by a concert of our own, made up mostly of negro melodies. Life in that school provided us with relaxation. The very insistence of the authorities on continual study in a solemn manner was to awaken the spirit of mischief. Our invention of a means of amusement to make up for the a-

of any in the curriculum brought our arrest and an order to appear before the court at Woodstock.

My allowance being pretty small, I worried terribly over how I was going to pay my hotel and travelling expenses; and also as to what my father, with his strict ideas, would say about it all. However, I summoned the courage and wrote him the truth. Of course, he sent me the money, but the letter accompanying the remittance was rather tart. He declared that in the start of my educational career away from home I had accomplished more than he had expected. Indeed, I had made such progress that he was convinced that I needed no further education, and my evident knowledge of the ways of the world should make me equal to undertaking the battle of life at once.

CHAPTER II

AT ANNAPOLIS

AT the time that I left Norwich, 1854, West Point had a great name as a disciplinary institution. There boys had to obey. Annapolis was not then so well known as West Point, being only nine years old. We owe the efficiency of the personnel of our navy to Annapolis; and we owe Annapolis to George Bancroft, a man of singular versatility of talent and singular sturdiness and decisiveness of character. He not only wrote the standard history of the United States which bears his name, but he was also minister to Berlin and secretary of the navy.

When he saw that, with the development of naval science, a school was as necessary for training officers for the navy as one for training officers for the army, his proposition met with the immediate opposition of the veteran officers of the service. Their disparagement was sufficient to prevent Congress from appropriating money to give the new institution a start. But this did not discourage Mr. Bancroft. He went right ahead with what resources he could command. At Annapolis there was old Fort Severn, which had been deserted. In want of funds for buildings, he secured the use of the build-

ings which had been occupied by the force that formerly manned the fort. The barracks which had housed privates of artillery became the dormitories of the future officers of the navy. Henry H. Lockwood, a former army officer and a graduate of West Point, was appointed professor of mathematics and became the chief instructor. Most of the other instructors were civilians. Their assistants were young officers of the navy.

While the majority of the old officers poked fun at the idea, one of the progressives, Franklin Buchanan, a Marylander, was Bancroft's energetic aid in the organization of the academy. Buchanan resigned from the navy at the outbreak of the Civil War; but when he found that his own State, Maryland, had not seceded, he tried to withdraw his resignation. This being refused, he joined the enemy. He commanded the *Merrimac* in her raid in Hampton Roads, at which time he was wounded. This made him the hero of the Confederate navy. He was in command at Mobile Bay against Farragut. It is one of the anomalies of history that one who had such strict loyalty to State's as opposed to national rights should have been the most conspicuous organizer of that school whose graduates, in the Spanish War, struck the blows which did so much to unite the North and the South in a new feeling of national unity before the world.

Too frequently credit for the Naval Academy

has been given to Buchanan rather than to Bancroft. It is related that Bancroft used to get much out of patience with the old officers. In those days the men on the captain's list received their assignments to ships in rotation, without regard to their fitness. A great many of the captains were not only old, but their habits, as the legacy of the hard-living days of the War of 1812, scarcely promoted efficiency in their declining years. Indeed, it was still the custom to serve out two rations of grog every day to the sailors, while officers of the broadside school did not limit themselves to any stated number. One of the veterans was so conspicuously unfit that Bancroft passed him by when it came his turn to have a ship. He wrote to the secretary in great indignation, wanting to know what he had done that he should have been overlooked in that fashion after a long career in his country's service. Bancroft wrote back, "Nothing!" which was exactly what that captain had been doing for a good many years.

Competitive examinations were not yet the rule in my time in choosing candidates for either West Point or Annapolis. Appointments were due entirely to the political favor of representatives in Congress. There was no vacancy for West Point from Vermont. Otherwise, I might have gone into Manila Bay on an army transport instead of on the *Olympia*.

But it happened that there was a vacancy at

Annapolis. A boy by the name of George Spaulding, of Montpelier, received the appointment at first, but decided that he would not take it. My father, through his influence with Senator Foote, had me made Spaulding's successor. Spaulding became a distinguished clergyman. Perhaps he was better suited for that than to be a sailor. Certainly I was better suited to be a sailor than a clergyman. I recollect that he preached a sermon in honor of the victory of Manila Bay at his church in Syracuse.

My father accompanied me to Annapolis, where I was to try the entrance examination. That was quite a journey into the world for a Vermont youngster of ante-bellum days. We went by rail to New York, where we stopped at the Irving House, which was kept by a Vermonter and was situated on Broadway, opposite A. T. Stewart's great store, which was then regarded as a kind of eighth wonder of the world by all women shoppers.

Father took me to the theatre, where Burton, a famous comedian of the period, was playing. I had never seen a real stage comedian before, and I laughed so hard that I fairly lost control of myself, and my father made me leave the theatre.

The next day we started for Annapolis, which was then twelve hours' journey from New York. First we took a steamer to Perth Amboy. From there we went by train to Philadelphia. Horses drew the car in which we went through the streets of

Philadelphia, and we left this car at Havre de Grace. I recall that we had luncheon on the steam ferry crossing the Susquehanna.

We went through Baltimore in the same way that we had through Philadelphia, in a railroad car drawn by horses at a trot, with a brakeman blowing a horn for people and vehicles to get out of the way of the through express.

The entrance examinations to the Naval Academy were very simple in those days, consisting chiefly of reading, writing, and arithmetic. I had the good fortune to pass. Before he started home my father said to me:

“George, I’ve done all I can for you. The rest you must do for yourself.”

This advice I have always tried to keep in mind.

Although the entrance examinations were easy, the process of elimination was even more rigorous through that stiff four years’ course than at present. Sixty of us entered the academy in ’54, and only fifteen of us were graduated in ’58. By the end of the first year twenty-three had been plucked. I was number thirty-three out of the remaining thirty-five. That old faculty for making things happen had given me one hundred and thirteen demerit marks. Two hundred meant dismissal.

I was very poor in history and geography, but excellent in mathematics, which had pulled me through. In the second year, when nine more had

been dropped, I was ninth among the survivors. My conduct marks had improved, and I was even better now in French and Spanish than in mathematics, but still low in history. On leaving the academy I was fifth among the fifteen who remained out of the original sixty. As for geography, I was to learn something of that in the harbors of the world. My weakness in history I overcame later in life, when I grew fond of reading. As for tactics and gunnery, in which I had also been low, I had practice in the Civil War which was far more valuable than any theory. Moreover, the tactics and gunnery which I had been taught at the academy were soon to become quite antiquated as more progressive officers already understood. I flatter myself that this accounted partially for my lack of interest in this branch.

The academy at that time had not yet settled in its traditions, and naval science was in a transition period from sails to steam. All the graduates of the academy were as yet juniors and not of any considerable influence in the service. No retirement provision existed. The old captains, many of whom had been in the War of 1812, were brought up in wooden frigates and ships of the line. Their ideas were very fixed. They had little charity for the innovations suggested by their juniors. To them a naval officer must ever remain primarily a sailor. But from them through the War of 1812 the navy had a proud inheritance. The history of that war

on land, with its untrained volunteer troops, in which our Capitol was burned and our effort at the invasion of Canada proved a fiasco, hardly makes pleasant reading for any American who has the right kind of patriotism, which never closes its eyes to facts.

But the ships of our little navy, keeping to the traditions of our fast clippers and of Decatur at Tripoli, by outrunning the enemy in overwhelmingly superior numbers, closing in on him when terms were equal, gave an account of themselves that thrilled the nation. They fought the veterans of Trafalgar according to their own methods. These were terrible, bloody encounters at close quarters. That of the *Constitution* and the *Guerrière* was over in an hour; that of the *United States* and the *Macedonian* in an hour and a half; and that of the *Hornet* and *Peacock* in fourteen minutes. The spirit of the lesson which the British learned in the Napoleonic wars, they met in us. It meant boarding with the cutlass when the ships were alongside, after they had been raked fore and aft with gun fire. Tactics and gunnery were very simple then compared to the present, when action may begin at a distance of six or seven miles.

The boys who came to Annapolis from all parts of a big expanse of a country not yet nationalized by the broad community of thought and intelligence of to-day had to be welded by the spirit of corps into a common life and purpose. When you enter

the academy you cease to be a Vermonter or a Georgian or a Californian. You are in the navy; your future, with its sea-service and its frequent changes of assignment, makes you first a man of the country's service and only secondly a man of the world. Your associations all your life are with the men of your first comradeship of study and discipline. My fellow-midshipmen at Annapolis were the officers who, rising grade by grade, held the important commands of squadrons and ships afloat, and were the commandants of navy-yards and the heads of bureaus ashore during the Spanish War.

In the fifties we were still almost exclusively an agricultural nation. Our population was hardly a third of what it is at present. Personal wealth and luxury were limited to a few of the older cities. The midshipman of to-day, with his fine quarters, his shower-bath, his superior and varied diet, his football stadium, his special trains to the annual army and navy games, expresses the change that has come over the life of the nation as a whole. We now practise as well as preach the precept that all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.

In my day at Annapolis we had no system of athletics except our regular military drill. There was no adequate gymnastic apparatus. The rule was one endless grind of acquiring knowledge. Our only amusement within the walls of the academy was the "stag hop" on Saturdays, held in the basement

of the old recitation hall. We were all vigorous boys or we could not have passed the physical entrance examination; and we were being trained for a career that required dash and physical spirits. Under such restraint there were bound to be outbreaks and such infractions of discipline as not only would not be tolerated but would not occur to-day. Every midshipman had his nickname, of course, as every one has had from the inception of the academy and still has, and mine was "Shang" Dewey. I confess that I do not know how it originated. Hazing was rife. It was accepted as a part of the curriculum in whipping raw youths, whose egoism may have been overdeveloped by fond parents, into the habit of comradeship and spirit of corps. The excuse for it in its rigor of my time no longer exists under the present organization, however. I fear, too, that the faculty did not always receive the respect that they should have received. An assistant professor called "Bull Pup" was at one time captured and imprisoned in a glass wall-case in the chemical laboratory as an expression of midshipman disapproval.

Such actions, if inexcusable, had the palliation of a course which was without athletics or amusement and of the youth of the academy, which had not yet found itself as an institution. However, I believe that rowdiness was then far more common in civilian colleges than it is to-day; and if, in later times as instructors, the men of my day would not permit

such infractions, it was proof of our realization of their utter subversion of military principles, while in recollection of our own close confinement we did provide for athletics and other forms of relaxation which left no excuse for ebullitions of an insubordinate nature.

Fistic arbitration of grievances between two midshipmen, I believe, still prevails under the supervision of upper-class men as the court of honor, in spite of the close observation of the commandant. There were numbers of them in my time. They were privately acknowledged, if openly discouraged, by the instructors as the manly way to settle differences. I looked after an affair of my own without waiting on any formality. A cadet who sat opposite me called me a name at mess which no man can hear without redress. I did not lose a second, and, springing around the table, I went for him and beat him down under the table before we were separated. That was a pretty serious infraction of discipline at mess. The combatants were brought up before the superintendent, Captain L. M. Goldsborough, later the well-known rear-admiral of the Civil War, who asked me why I had made the attack. I told him the name which my classmate had called me. He said that I could not have done anything else, fined me ten demerits, and assured the fellow whom I had thrashed that he had got exactly what he deserved. That I thought was a very sensible decision.